

**TRAILS IN TRANSPARENCY II: IS VA
RESPONDING TO CONGRESSIONAL
REQUESTS IN A TIMELY MANNER?**

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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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TRIALS IN TRANSPARENCY II: IS VA RESPONDING TO CONGRESSIONAL REQUESTS IN A TIMELY MANNER?

Thursday, April 3, 2014

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
*Washington, D.C.***

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:09 a.m., in Room 334, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Jeff Miller [chairman of the committee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Miller, Lamborn, Bilirakis, Roe, Runyan, Benishek, Huelskamp, Coffman, Wenstrup, Cook, Jolly, Michaud, Brown, Brownley, Titus, Kirkpatrick, Negrete-McLeod, O'Rourke, and Walz

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JEFF MILLER

The CHAIRMAN. Good morning, and the hearing will now come to order. As the title of today's hearing suggests, we are going to conduct our constitutional oversight duties. VA needs to respond in a timely manner to our requests for us to be able to get our job done.

With us today is Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson.

I want to note for the record and for the Members of this committee, we invited Assistant Secretary Joan Mooney to testify since she is by title the assistant secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs and as a presidential appointee, she agreed to testify before Congress whenever she was called to do so.

My office received a communication from her just a little while ago. First of all, I am shocked she is not in the room. Second of all, she sent a communication telling us what you, Mr. Secretary, were prepared to answer when she was told exactly what we were going to be inquiring about.

We do not want a 30,000 foot view in testimony in responding to our questions. We have already done this once. She did a very poor job that day in the hearing and has since done a very poor job. And I think her absence today continues to show her lack of respect to this committee.

Her constant lateness with providing information that is vital to our constitutional obligation and responsibility, I think, is an affront to this committee. It is an affront to the veterans that she purports to support, and I hope that you will take back to her our personal displeasure of her trying to direct where the questions of this committee should go. The fact that we want to get into the

weeds on some things is critical because, as you well know, the weeds have grown very tall over the last year or more.

So suffice it to say I am not happy. For the second time we are gathered to hear how we can improve a process that too often results in frustration and delay for every Member of this committee.

I want to start with the positives because there are positives. Since our last hearing, VA has improved its submission of testimony on time. So that is an area where progress has been made. I mean, until this progress there were many times that we did not receive testimony until the night before, sometimes the morning of committee hearings.

I would also like to recognize what I view as a positive tone in your testimony as we have read about improving the timely response to the requests that this committee makes. You are totally correct in the fact that the Veterans' Affairs committees and the VA have a common duty to ensure that we meet the Nation's commitment to its veterans.

Unfortunately, long delayed responses for information, documents, or questions continue to plague us. As of Tuesday, the average days pending for all 96 requests was 143 with 66 pending over 60 days and 50 over 100 days. In fact, we have three requests pending since 2012. And our oldest outstanding request is 666 days pending.

The last time we visited this subject with Assistant Secretary Mooney, she testified regarding the literally thousands of inquiries that VA receives from Capitol Hill.

And, look, I understand the reality. We all understand the realities. But I have to continue the committee's active oversight of the department. That is our job.

As they should, Members of the House and Senate take great interest in VA and its programs because of the missions that it performs and that is not going to change on my watch. I understand there are a lot of moving parts involving responses to our requests. Many are outside of VA's control.

But in the end, it is VA's responsibility to provide Congress with complete, accurate, and timely answers regardless. Perhaps moving the issue up the chain of command will help improve VA's performance in this area.

Mr. Secretary, I thank you for your friendship. I thank you for being here to testify today.

And I want to recognize my good friend, the ranking member, Mr. Michaud, for his opening statement.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JEFF MILLER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

OPENING STATEMENT OF MIKE MICHAUD, RANKING MINORITY MEMBER

Mr. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for having this hearing today.

This hearing is about accountability for individual congressional requests and also an opportunity to discuss what can be done to improve the relationship between the VA and this committee.

Mr. Gibson, congratulations, first of all, on your recent appointment as deputy secretary for the Department of Veterans Affairs and we appreciate that you are here today as well.

And I am encouraged by the shift in tone conveyed by your participation in your written testimony. For the first time, the department has clearly, concisely, and publicly indicated that the status quo must change. Thank you for that open and honest acknowledgement.

Also from your written testimony and our recent conversation, it appears you as the deputy secretary and the chief operating officer are taking on the challenge from the department perspective. I think that will be a significant improvement and I look forward to working with you in a collaborative and constructive manner.

As I have laid out in my discussions with the secretary, I have three basic expectations of the VA about customer service.

My first expectation is that VA is responsive to congressional inquiries. While I recognize that our founding fathers' construct of the separation of powers, I also recognize their construct of checks and balances between these separate powers.

Oversight is a fundamental power provided to Congress and a fundamental obligation of Congress. Getting the information from the department is crucial for Congress doing its job. This is not a civics discussion but directly affects our ability as a co-equal branch of government to do our job.

VA's responses to congressional inquiries should be thoughtful, thorough, and complete.

Since my recent conversation with Secretary Shinseki, a set of standard operating procedures addresses responsiveness between the committee democratic staff and VA's OCLA has been agreed to and put in place. These appear to be working well so far.

I appreciate the VA OCLA's team's willingness to work out those SOPs and adhere to them and I hold my staff accountable for adhering to our part of that agreement.

My second expectation is that VA is timely in its response to congressional inquiries. I recognize that thoughtful, thorough, and complete responses take time. I also recognize that, you know, time moves at a different pace in Congress and the VA. This is not a judgment. It is a statement of acknowledgment that our work occurs at different speeds.

Reasonable accommodation is somewhat, I believe, in between. When a response is needed and what can be provided by that date and when a final response will be forthcoming should be a frequent routine discussion between our staffs.

Since the last transparency hearing held by this committee in September 2013, we have seen an improvement in the timeliness of VA's testimony submissions and response to congressional inquiries.

However, we continue to see substantial delays from one to three months on a few individual Members' inquiries tracked by the committee staff. And I will defer to those Members to discuss their specific inquiries to you directly.

It is often difficult to get a straight answer on the reasons for the delay in response. It appears that the lack of timeliness in VA's response to congressional inquiries may in part be cumbersome re-

view process that the department has to go through both internal and external to the organization preparing the response.

This, Mr. Gibson, is likely the toughest part of your challenge to improve the process. However, it behooves everyone involved that the review and approval process to work collaboratively to change and improve the process.

No one benefits from frustrated, dysfunctional relationship between an administration and Congress, least of all our veterans.

And my final expectation that the VA allows congressional Members and staff direct access to subject matter experts within the department. This means that the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs to facilitate, not control, but to facilitate the interaction between the VA executive and The Hill. For the most part, these interactions in my opinion, the OCL lay roles, you know, should be transparent to all of us.

Our staffs hear informally that the VA subject matter experts want to talk to us. The experts in your department, they really want to talk to us. They want to share the good news and the progress they are making. They believe getting ahead of the bad news is important. They understand that the trust that you mention in your written testimony begins with an open, honest communication.

We in Congress understand the need and value that your message has to be consistent. The way to accomplish this is through internal department coordination, not a single filter through OCLA. Politicians know that during a campaign, you try to control the message. During the governing process that comes after the election, which we are through, you need to collaborate around that message. Failing to do so means failure.

Just recently one of my staff members met a young soldier at a professional reception. He was there representing a new army program to help soldiers transition from active duty. Unable to have a robust discussion about the program at that reception, the soldier agreed to follow-up with my staff. Within one week, the soldier and my staff exchanged several emails, met once, and set up follow-up meetings for other staff and Members. There was no red tape, no DoD or army legislative affairs' intervention, no delays, no complications.

That is what I expect from the VA, just a swift, simple, direct, you know, doing the business that people in the VA, I know, at that staff level want to do without having to be filtered through OCLA because that is cumbersome, delays the process, increase frustrations, and also makes sure that our veterans do not get the services that they need.

So, Mr. Gibson, I look forward to your testimony today. I appreciate your testimony and what you had to say in your testimony and I look forward to hearing what we need to do for both the Administration and Congress, how we can build that trust, have that open line of communication, improve our working relationships because that is what we are here for. I know that is what you are there for is to do what we can for our veterans. We do not need an administrative bureaucracy over at OCLA that filters the process, that inhibits the ability of the department and this committee

to work collaboratively together. And I look forward to your discussion that we are having here today on this very important issue.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. MIKE MICHAUD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

As I said earlier, the only witness that we have today before us is Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson, a little bit of background on Sloan: He graduated in 1975 from West Point and qualified as both an airborne soldier and a ranger and served as an infantry officer.

He holds a master's in economics from the University of Missouri in Kansas City and a master's in public administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. And following 20 years of service in the banking industry, he served as the president and CEO of the USO for five years and was confirmed as deputy secretary last February.

Secretary Gibson, welcome, and you are now recognized for five minutes for your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF SLOAN GIBSON, DEPUTY SECRETARY, U.S.
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Before I begin, I would just like to say that the thoughts and prayers of all of us at VA are with the families that were affected by yesterday's tragic events at Fort Hood. In my prior role, the USO was a critical part of helping that community recover and heal. And I know they will need a lot of that kind of support again.

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, other distinguished Members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on VA's ongoing work to provide our congressional partners with timely information.

Let me also acknowledge representatives of veterans service organizations in attendance. Our relationship with VSOs is generally a very positive and productive one. We do not always agree on every issue, but we work through our differences enabling us to best serve veterans, their families, and our survivors.

Just six weeks ago, I was privileged to join Secretary Shinseki and more than 340,000 men and women, one-third of whom are veterans themselves, who work hard each day to do their best for our Nation's veterans.

I spent the last five and a half years doing all I can to support America's servicemembers and military families and as a veteran and the son and grandson of veterans, I bring that same passion to this opportunity to serve.

As I reflect on my first weeks at VA, the learning curve is steep, but it is deeply gratifying work. Next week, I start on an aggressive spring and summer travel schedule to meet with veterans and VA employees, the really most important way to understand veterans' needs and the work our people in the field are doing.

What is best for our veterans is what guides all of our work at VA and that is my singular focus in my role there. That is also what connects VA to the Members of this committee, the shared

goal of doing everything we can to improve the healthcare, benefits, services for veterans, their families, and survivors.

All of us at VA are grateful for the commitment and sustained support of Congress in both resources and legislative authorities. Your support enables us to accomplish our mission.

Everything we do at VA is built on a foundation of trust, the trust of veterans and their families, the trust of the American people, and their elected representatives who provide the resources essential to our mission. We earn that trust a quarter of a million times every day by delivering on our promise to care for those who shall have borne the battle.

We also earn that trust by being good stewards of the resources that we are given and that includes providing accurate and timely information to those who provide VA resources. Anything that erodes that trust does tangible harm to veterans.

I believe the status quo in our working relationship can improve. This is not a VA Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs' issue. It is not a Veterans Health Administration issue or a Veteran Benefits Administration issue. It is a department issue. It is a VA issue.

That is why I am here and that is why I pledged to do our part to improve how VA provides information to this committee and seek to work with you in a straightforward, collaborative, and constructive manner. I believe that is what veterans expect and I know it is what they deserve.

VA currently provides the committee and other Members of Congress a remarkable volume of information that was noted in some of the opening statements.

Since the last hearing on this subject in September of 2013, our on-time performance for delivering testimony and questions for the record is approaching 100 percent, but we know we must work to improve the on-time delivery of correspondence and other requests for information. And we are aggressively working to do that. I ask for this committee's positive support and constructive engagement in that process.

To reiterate, VA and Congress share the same goal to best serve veterans, their families, and survivors. We respect Congress's important oversight role and pledge to continue to work collaboratively and cooperatively with you. When we work in that way together, I believe veterans are best served.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today and for your continued support of veterans. I look forward to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF SLOAN GIBSON APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much for your testimony.

We will start off with one round of questions and then if we need to go to a second round, we will do that as well.

Secretary Gibson, one of the key committee concerns is about the safety of the VA employees and the veterans who are receiving care at VA facilities across the country. No one, whether they are an employee or a veteran, should fear for their lives at a VA facility, but that is not the case unfortunately.

Let me give you a couple of examples of safety-related requests that we have made and are waiting on the department to reply.

The first is in regards to employment of a registered sex offender in the women's health unit at the Lebanon, PA Medical Center. Representative Jim Gerlach had first raised the issue in a letter to the secretary requesting information. He has received no response.

I sent a letter to the secretary dated December 20th, 2013 requesting all information related to the hiring and assignments as well as compliance with OPM hiring guidelines and background checks. To date, no reply.

The second issue involves the death of a patient at the Alexandria VA Medical Center in Louisiana following an altercation with an employee of the medical center. Again, in a December 12th letter to the secretary, I requested all information related to the incident including security system products and employee records. To date, Mr. Secretary, no response.

When can this committee expect that VA will provide the data that we have requested regarding these two cases?

Mr. GIBSON. Mr. Chairman, the safety and security of both patients and employee staff at VA installations across the country is of paramount concern to us. In these particular instances, I am not familiar with the facts of the case, but I commit to you that we will provide a status report on those promptly.

I note that Secretary Mooney that you referred to earlier is on The Hill every single week, oftentimes multiple times a week. She has standing visits on Fridays with members of the staff and she would be delighted to visit with members of your staff or with you, sir, or I would be delighted to visit with you, sir, to discuss the status of the item.

The CHAIRMAN. I do note that Secretary Mooney is not at least in the Cannon Building today. She may be on The Hill every other day, but she is not here today.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. And this is in the trials and transparency Web site that we have posted. So all of this information, and this goes back to what I was saying in the middle of my opening statement, she knew that we wanted to get into the weeds on specific questions. And then shortly before this hearing, we get an email from her saying you are not prepared to talk and specifics, only at the 30,000 foot level. And, again, that is just not acceptable.

One of the most alarming trends that I see with the committee's current outstanding deliverables list is the multiple outstanding requests regarding mental healthcare. You mentioned the tragic incident at Fort Hood yesterday where there appears to be a mental health component, albeit DoD, but mental health all the same.

There are numerous requests from our Oversight Subcommittee and our Health Subcommittee regarding a mental health provider survey. I understand that requests for this survey which include data analysis as well as responses to open-ended questions have been echoed in multiple oversight forums including committee hearings and staff briefings and by both this committee and our counter-parts in the Senate.

Again, why is it taking so long to get questions answered on this vital issue and if you are not prepared to respond to that particular

question, will you commit to providing me with a survey and its results by close of business today and, if not, why?

Mr. GIBSON. Mr. Chairman, I recall over the past five years from time to time, I would be asked if there was anything that kept me awake at night. And my consistent response to that question was my concern about our collective ability to meet the mental health needs of servicemembers, veterans, and their families. This is a personal priority for me. It is also a priority for the department.

I am aware that in the case of this particular request that there has been substantial information provided. I believe there have also been briefings provided to some of the staff. We would be delighted to come, provide a briefing to you, sir, at your convenience.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. My time has expired.

Mr. MICHAUD.

Mr. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

And, once again, thank you very much, Mr. Secretary, for being here.

And since we had the last discussion and my previous conversations with the secretary about how can we improve the relationships between the VA and this committee, and we hear over and over again the number of requests that the department gets from Members of Congress which I understand there are quite a few, so in order to speed up that process, we said, well, rather than writing our requests, let's have an informal discussion.

And that gets back to us meeting with subject matter, you know, experts that actually want to talk to the committee, but that is still a problem because the fact of the matter is we still have to wait anywhere from six to eight weeks from OCLA giving the approval for subject matter experts to talk to us. So that is a frustration.

So would you please, describe to me your operational perspective on how the VA subject matter experts could and should interact with Congress?

Mr. GIBSON. Congressman, thanks for the question. You brought the issue up the other day when we visited.

We think it is very important to be able to get timely information to Members of this committee for you to exercise your oversight responsibilities. You offered this particular mechanism as a great example of ways that we can work collaboratively where the opportunity exists to provide a briefing as opposed to responding to a formal request.

And my experience, my sense is that when we do that, we often times hit the nail on the head and we are able to do it much more quickly. Those should happen promptly. And I know in the instance that you have referred to, it is pretty clear to me that we did not meet that standard.

We have done so far in the first six months of this year 217 briefings on The Hill. Every single one of those briefings is done by a subject matter expert. So you are right. They are delighted to come visit. We are delighted to have them come visit. And I commit to you that we will do our best to make the responsiveness what it ought to be.

Mr. MICHAUD. I mean, what role do you think OCLA has in that?

I can understand during the campaign, the President wanted to keep his message focused and, therefore, departments were kind of

restricted of what they could do during an election year, but now is the time to govern. And I think that message as far as the department, where the department goes should be consistent.

And part of the problem, quite frankly, is OCLA having to be the filter and that is what the delay is from six to eight weeks in having us be able to do it. The reason why I gave the example with the army folks is that is how DoD does it. I mean, within a week, they had several meetings, several email discussions. Any time you put a stopper in there where you have to get approval, particularly through OCLA, it slows down that process.

And we want to make sure that we can have that ongoing conversation. That is one of the reasons why we agreed to have these informal discussions with the subject matter experts, but that still is a problem.

So what role do you think OCLA has to be involved in this whole process as a filter versus as a facilitator which we are trying to do is facilitate?

Mr. GIBSON. I think you just answered your own question. It is a facilitator. When there is interest in a particular topic, there is a need for Members of this Committee and other Members of Congress to be able to plug in some more within the organization. And, frankly, I believe that ought to be within the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs.

Part of my responsibility in all of this is to make sure that if we have got bottlenecks within our own internal process that we eliminate those bottlenecks. And so that is an opportunity for us to manage that.

As I mentioned, these subject matter experts enjoy the opportunity to come over and visit with Members and visit with staff. And I commit to you that we will work to make that a more responsive process.

Mr. MICHAUD. I appreciate that very much because I remember when I was first on this committee, actually I got a directory of all the staff over at the Department of Veterans Administration, their phone numbers. So if I ever had a question, rather than, you know, go through OCLA or the under secretaries, we were able to actually—because a lot of times, these questions could be answered very quickly.

When I became ranking member, I said, well, gee, I have not had a directory and they said, well, they do not have them which I know that, quite frankly, you must have a directory of all the VA. I can understand you do not want people calling in all the time, but it is problematic, particularly if OCLA feels that they have to be the filter.

And I agree a hundred percent and I am glad you mentioned about the fact that they should be a facilitator because that is the role that they should be and that will help eliminate, I believe, some of the frustrations that we have over here on our side on that.

So, once again, thank you very much for your response. I appreciate it.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. MICHAUD. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

The vice chair of the committee, Mr. Bilirakis, is recognized for five minutes.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

And thank you, sir, for your testimony.

What do you think needs to happen moving forward to have 100 percent QFRs and 100 percent of testimony submitted on time? More funding, more staffing, better management of the current resources? What do you think needs to happen?

Mr. GIBSON. Well, Congressman, I may not have understood the question exactly. In the case of timely submission of testimony, this fiscal year, we are delivering on time 96 percent of the time and responses—

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Why isn't it 100 percent of the time?

Mr. GIBSON. Sir, we were late 15 minutes with one piece of testimony for the 33 hearings that we have testified at this year. So our goal is a hundred percent and that is what we are aiming for. And we are at a hundred percent in timely submission of QFRs.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. I—

Mr. GIBSON. And the opportunity, frankly, is for us to extend that kind of excellent performance in other categories of communication.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. I want to move on to the next question.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. I have limited time. Do you have process inquiries in the order they are received? Are they prioritized in any way?

Mr. GIBSON. In the process of trying to respond, just in the first six months of this year, we have responded to 2,675 inquiries from Congress. So orchestrating those responses is a challenge when you look at all the different categories of response.

Normally, particularly as it relates to executive correspondence, the correspondence from the chairman and from the ranking member is a category of correspondence that we put very high in the priority and we try to turn those around very quickly whenever possible.

For executive correspondence coming from Members, the goal is to respond within 30 days. There are occasions when we should meet that standard and I do not believe that we are. There are other occasions where the nature of the request is such that it is pretty clear fairly early on that it is going to take more than 30 days to respond.

And I think what we owe the Members of the Committee and the staff is that we pick up the phone or send an email and we work out a time frame that makes sense for us to be able to provide a timely and complete response.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. All right. Thank you.

Yes or no, did you know that the average number of days of all requests pending are 143 days? I know it was mentioned here in the committee. Why 143 days? Why that long? I just do not understand.

Mr. GIBSON. Congressman, are you referring to the number of days pending for the 96 items on Chairman Miller's list? I am not sure the—

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Well, in other words, the average number of days all requests pending, 143 days, that is my understanding. The committee says an average of 143 days for all inquiries pending.

Mr. GIBSON. Congressman, I understand the frustration here. I am taking ownership and committing to improve response times.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Maybe the 96 currently on the list.

Mr. GIBSON. Okay. I—

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Address that issue.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir. I would tell you in the course of responding, say, for example, to the more than 2,600 inquiries that we have received this year or the more than 8,600 that we have responded to over the last 18 months, many of those responses are turned around very quickly, very much within that two-week or that 30-day standard.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you. Let me move on to the next question.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Did you know that there were 50 inquiries over three months pending and why?

Mr. GIBSON. Where I was going with the other answer, I am going to kind of keep going with this answer. There are occasions where we receive, and many of the requests are the kinds of requests that we are able to respond to very timely within that two-week or within that 30-day time frame, but there are requests that we receive that by the nature of the request, the complexity of the request will require extensive gathering of data, extensive analysis of the data, and review of the data to ensure that we are providing the right information to respond to the question.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay.

Mr. GIBSON. And those are of necessity going to require longer. Now—

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you. Next question.

Yes or no, are you aware that there are 66 inquiries over two months pending? I mean—

Mr. GIBSON. Well—

Mr. BILIRAKIS [continuing]. My opinion, it is inexcusable. We need this information timely to do our job.

Mr. GIBSON. Congressman, I understand that need. And we are committed to providing timely information. And where we are able to respond to requests within the goal standards that we set, we do that. But there are requests that we receive that there is just simply no way that within a two-week or a 30-day period of time that we are going to be able to provide an adequate response.

And as a result of that, part of what needs to happen, part of the collaboration that I think we need to work toward is that we have the kind of robust communication that Ranking Member Michaud was referring to earlier that we are talking through this. We understand that the scope of the request is such that it is, going to require this extensive time and effort to gather.

There may be things that the Member is willing to do to tailor the request a little bit, still accomplishing the underlying intent, that would allow us to deliver it more quickly or alternatively that there may be a little bit of relief in terms of the deadline and the expectation for a timely response.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. All right. Thank you.

Mr. CHAIRMAN. I want to give the other Members an opportunity. I appreciate it. Thanks for holding the hearing as well.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Ms. Brown, you are recognized for five minutes. And I do want to compliment you on your attire today.

Ms. BROWN. Go Gator.

But welcome, Mr. Gibson, to the House of Representatives.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you, ma'am.

Ms. BROWN. I know that the chairman is not going to be happy or the ranking member that they recognize me because I really am a little confused why we are having this hearing today. We just had a hearing six months ago.

I do not find the department politics and when does the politics end and the service begin. I am hoping service is all the time because our role is to make sure that we are serving the veterans.

And I would like to have a hearing on mental health and what are we doing as far as partnering with some local communities because those services are already there. And then VA should do more oversight because of the volume of the amount of work.

And then there are certain instances, for example, when we are talking about someone that has gotten killed, it is some legal ramifications for you to come up here and say something to us when we may be in court on those issues.

And the volume, I mean, it is not just this committee. It is the Senate. It is government oversight. So you get thousands of requests.

And so how do we deal with all of that and who gets the priority? I want to say the priority should be the veterans. So you can respond to me.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am. As I mentioned in my opening statement, I think the vast shared common ground that we have here is our interest in ensuring that veterans are best served.

I think when we can build and maintain positive, constructive, collaborative relationships between Committees and the department that is the environment where the best outcomes are going to result, where veterans are going to be best served.

And I am prepared. I am owning issues surrounding opportunities for improving responsiveness because I understand that that is important to the committee. I am going to make it important to me and it is important to the department, but collaboration really involves two parties.

And so being able to work together collaboratively as Ranking Member Michaud outlined, I think, is a very positive step for veterans.

Ms. BROWN. Yes. Can you tell us the volume of requests that you have gotten from Congress?

Mr. GIBSON. I can tell you the number that we have responded to.

Ms. BROWN. Uh-huh.

Mr. GIBSON. In the first six months of this year, 2,675.

Ms. BROWN. Uh-huh.

Mr. GIBSON. In the last 18 months, just over 8,600 requests.

Ms. BROWN. Uh-huh. And what is the staffing that you have to respond to this 8,600?

Mr. GIBSON. Well, ma'am, because we want to provide the best information that we possibly can, accurate information and complete information, in the vast majority of instances, a large portion of the response winds up being originally created inside the Veterans Health Administration, inside the Veterans Benefits Administration, inside the National Cemetery Administration by people that are actually charged with serving and caring for veterans on a day in and day out basis.

So that workload gets distributed broadly across the organization, but then managed on a more central basis. It would be impossible for me to even guess at the number of people that are involved or the number of man hours that are involved in responding to all of those requests.

Ms. BROWN. I guess my question is, do they have any responsibility other than responding to Congress?

Mr. GIBSON. Oh, yes, ma'am. In fact, the majority of people that participate in developing responses to Congress are people that have direct responsibility for serving veterans.

Ms. BROWN. Okay.

Mr. GIBSON. They are people inside the administrations because nine times out of ten, the questions we receive are questions about service to veterans as they well should be.

Ms. BROWN. Uh-huh.

Mr. GIBSON. And so these are people very often that have direct responsibility in that area. And to the extent that they are spending time, and it is important to provide the appropriate information timely, it is important for us to provide that information to this committee and to other committees of Congress. That is how veterans are best served when we work together in that kind of way.

Ms. BROWN. And I have got to say that you all have been very responsive to me. Just yesterday, the head judge from Duval County was here. I wanted them to have a quick meeting with someone from the VA because we have the veterans court and it is working really well. And we have the mental health court and we were talking about what we could do to expand this program.

So, you know, I personally will give you a response. I know we need to work together to improve the services for veterans.

Thank you very much, and I yield back my time.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you, ma'am.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much for the committee's information. The Office of Legislative Affairs since 2009 has increased 30 percent in regards to their ability to do their work as it relates to the requests that have been made.

Dr. Roe, you are recognized.

Mr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman

And thank you for being here and thank you for taking some time to come by my office—

Mr. GIBSON. It is great to see you, sir.

Mr. ROE [continuing]. And for the hearing. And thank you for the service, and your service to our country, too. And I appreciate your forthrightness in being able to get this information to us in a timely fashion.

And as Mr. Michaud said, one of the frustrations I have had here and many Members here, I actually read this stuff and I cannot read it if I get a Sears and Roebuck catalogue the night before—

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. ROE [continuing]. And make any sense out of it. So being timely, and I say this tongue in cheek, but here in Washington, I do not think anybody ever got a term paper done on time. And we know when these hearings are going to be and it would be nice to get this information and that you are getting it to us. Thank you very much.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. ROE. And I hope that continues where we get it a day or two ahead where we can actually go through it and get something meaningful out of—

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. ROE [continuing]. The hearing. And another comment that Mr. Michaud made, well, you know, he did not want to call the office. Well, people call his office all the time. And he mentioned exactly what happened. I have a staff of seven people here because of the cutbacks and we are making it work.

And a lady Sunday at church pulled me over aside about an issue that I was not aware of. We put some information out to the secretary of Labor. We have called the appropriate, two appropriate organizations and her. I did not get her this morning, but I left her a message. That is timely. And I was a little ashamed it was four days, three days to get back and get her the information she needed.

We need this information to be able to carry out our jobs.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. ROE. We cannot do it without it.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. ROE. And I think the VA has the personnel to do what you need to do. And, look, if something, as Mr. Bilirakis said, is going to take—you mentioned some of these issues are very complicated. Somebody could send a letter in two weeks and say, look, this is a very complicated issue, we have looked this far in three paragraphs. I do not need the sermon on the mount.

I just need a cliff notes version of what you are doing so that I know you have not forgotten me because I think it is rude and arrogant when you do that. I think when you ignore requests, it means that either it is not important to you or you do not think it is important to me. And I would not be making that request if it were not.

So I would suggest you do that, send out an interim letter or some information so that we know that you have not just buried us and forgotten about it because we have thousands of issues we deal with every day.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. ROE. And we do not have 300,000 employees as the VA does. So just a comment on that. And I think those are a few little things you could do for me personally if I write you a letter and it may take you 90 days to get the information back. I understand that.

And I also understand I do not know. That is a perfectly good answer, too. I have said that many times in my career. When I did

not know something, just I do not know the answer to it, but we will get back to you. But do not say that and then never get back to me. I think that is okay not knowing the answer if I ask you a question or if you ask me one. I do not know. I will get back to you.

So that is just a comment. I actually have no other comments. I yield back my time.

Mr. GIBSON. If I could just say, sir, what you just outlined is perfectly reasonable. That is a perfectly reasonable expectation and it is what we should be doing routinely.

Mr. ROE. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Brownley, you are recognized for five minutes.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Mr. Gibson, for testifying here today. And congratulations—

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you.

Ms. BROWNLEY [continuing]. On your recent appointment and confirmation.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you.

Ms. BROWNLEY. And I know, as you know, you have been trusted as all of us on the committee have been with a great task and very important task of serving our Nation's veterans. And I am looking forward to working with you to ensure the needs are properly met in a timely manner and also in a qualitative manner as well.

And I also want to thank you for our meeting yesterday—

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. BROWNLEY [continuing]. And your attention to my district where the wait time exceeds 44 days for mental health services. So I really do appreciate that very, very much.

I wanted to ask really two questions. One, specifically, on the congressional legislative affairs office and the fact that in 2013, as you stated, we have made great improvements based on the data, and if you could just comment, what has changed? Why is it better? What has happened?

And then secondarily, in your testimony, when you stated that it is not a Veterans Health Administration problem or a Veterans Benefit Administration problem; it is a Department issue.

I know that you have only been with us here for six very—six short weeks, but if you could, with fresh eyes, share with the committee what you think needs to be changed on a Department-Wide basis to be more customer friendly, and more service oriented—what changes, larger changes you see.

So if you could speak, specifically, to the legislative—congressional and legislative affairs office and speak more broadly on the Department.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am. Thanks for the question.

First, I would say that I think recognizing the importance of timely communication with this committee and frankly with other committees and other Members of Congress, and supported by the encouragement from the chairman and from this committee. I think a lot of additional attention was focused on specifically areas of timely receipt of testimony and timely delivery of responses to questions for the record and I think that very intensive focus is what allowed that progress to be demonstrated.

Within the Department, it is a large and a complex organization, and so as you kind alluded to earlier, there are different parts of the organization that get involved in different kinds of ways, ranking member mentioned earlier that they are the process of review. And so as I wade into this space, my sense is there are opportunities for us to streamline the review process. I think there are perhaps some opportunities for us to establish interim milestones along the way when we have a relatively more complex item that we know we are going to have to respond to.

And then, as we discussed a moment ago, the need for this routine and robust communication so that we understand; we are acknowledging that we have not only just—we have gotten the item, but we are working on the item. Here is how we think things are coming, and I would reiterate again, that the staff of the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs is on The Hill every week and they are always willing to provide an update to a member of your staff or to a member on any particular item.

And so I think it is creating a more end-to-end process and creating more visibility about how we are doing it each step of the way, which will allow us to identify the bottlenecks that we were talking about earlier.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Well thank you for that, and I mean if there is anything more specific, you know, other than in terms of the legislative affairs office, you are saying just more focus, more attention to responsiveness and timeliness has made the difference in terms of the data in 2013. But is there anything more than that has specifically changed or it is just that sort of direction and focus?

Mr. GIBSON. I think there is more horsepower pushing this locomotive and that is one of the reasons that I am here. We are very focused on this. This is important. This relationship is not just important to us at VA; it is important to veterans. Because the veterans get best served when we are working together constructively, so we understand that. We understand that we are not meeting the expectation and that we have work to do. And so there is a lot more horsepower pushing the engine on this issue inside the Department.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Thank you, sir.

I yield back.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

Mr. Runyan, you are recognized for five minutes.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you, Chairman.

And, Deputy Secretary Gibson, thank you for your service and your testimony.

Kind of going back to what you were just talking about, and you used the phrase “horsepower,” and thank you for the meeting we had yesterday. And I know you, Secretary Shinseki, all the time talk about accountability. Well, I want to put this out here and give a couple of examples of it. With accountability, you have to parallel that with consequences. And I have asked this question many times to many different under secretaries and the thing a lot of the times are what are the consequences? As we sit up here as elected members, everybody on this dais has consequences of them not executing their job; it is called an election.

Our veterans have consequences not executing their job in the field; it is the lives of their comrades around them. I did the same thing when I played in the NFL. The consequence of not doing your job; you lost your job at the end of the day. Are there formal structures, formal procedures that you have, throughout your leadership model, to hold people accountable?

We talk about accountability, but truly, who is being held accountable and what are the processes and procedures to do that within your model?

Mr. GIBSON. First of all, I would say, Congressman, that one of the things that has really struck me about my first six weeks in the Department is the passion that people have for the mission that we do; their determination to do the right thing; and the fact that they are working very, very hard to accomplish that mission.

At VA, and I would say in any organization, the thought process begins with ensuring that clear standards are established, and then the leader's job is to make sure that the skills and the other resources associated with being able to meet that standard are available. And so when there are performance issues that arise in the wake of that kind of good foundation, then you start a process of constructive engagement, where you are trying to understand where the issues are.

I would tell you from my own private sector experience, my experience inside VA is obviously very limited at this point, but in my private sector experience, rarely did that result in a firing, in a removal from a position. Because you work with somebody, often times the performance improved. In other instances, you would work with someone and they would self-select out. They would retire. They would resign. They would step down to a position that is perhaps less challenging and within the scope of their ability. Rarely in the private sector does it result in firing someone. And so I know the secretary has said on numerous occasions that he believes that he has the authority that he needs to hold people accountable. I will tell you that there are elaborate performance measures in place across the organization that people are expected to meet and I believe there is a strong system of accountability in place.

Mr. Runyan. And I thank you for the response, but I think what you are touching on there, it kind of comes back to a phrase you used yesterday in our meeting in talking about relationships, when you have a close, personal connection to those around you. And I think, you know, as the chairman and the ranking member have said, sometimes we don't have these relationships. We don't have a personal connection, a lot of times to the people we need the information from; there are barriers in there. That personal relationship has accountability to it—

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, it does.

Mr. RUNYAN [continuing]. Because they feel like they are letting people down and that is the structure of a team. We are all on a team here to serve our veterans, and I think these are the barriers. You addressed in our meeting yesterday, we have to get there, though, and those accountability measures I think can be reached through more open dialogue and better relationships in the long run.

Mr. GIBSON. Well, if there is any mistaking here, let me clarify it. I am the accountable guy, and so I believe in the importance of those relationships, and believe me, as I walk out the door today when we are finished, that starts the work; that doesn't finish the work, because I am accountable back to you and every other member of this committee.

Mr. RUNYAN. Thank you.

And Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

I apologize, I am going to have to leave in just a minute, but I want to ask, specifically, since we are talking about transparency and accountability, and I think it is very, very important that we discuss it. Are you familiar with the report that NBC, here in Washington, just did about a VA employee that was involved in an incident, left, and then was hired back—actually, I think the employee's name was Fillingham—are you familiar with that?

Mr. GIBSON. Mr. Chairman, I have read one news account of—associated with that and that is the full extent of my knowledge of what you're talking about.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me, just if I can, give you a little background. If the members will indulge the Chair for just a minute.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. In fact, Mr. Coffman, who chairs the oversight and investigative subcommittee sent a letter to the secretary on December 20th of 2013 and it was requesting Mr. Fillingham's personnel file, and the letter also asked that the request not be treated the same as a FOIA, or Freedom of Information Act request, from the general public. We haven't gotten a response. And so the question is: Why in the world would Mr. Coffman's letter go unresponded to when the Freedom of Information Act, by a news organization, was responded to weeks ago?

And since we don't have a response from the VA on Mr. Coffman's letter, I am going to take this opportunity to ask these couple questions and maybe fill you in.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. The media reports that the police and federal investigators found that Fillingham drove a government vehicle, after drinking with two other VA employees. One of Fillingham's colleagues fell out of the truck while it was moving and that employee died.

According to media reports, VA records show that Fillingham was later allowed to resign from VA, but was rehired by the Department just months later while he is still under federal investigation, and the media reports at a salary of \$100,000.

So the question is: Why isn't drinking and driving a government vehicle on VA business a fireable offense? Why would VA rehire an employee still under investigation for misconduct? Who decided to rehire Jed Fillingham? Why did they rehire him? And what is VA currently doing in response to this incident?

And I only ask the question because we have waited since the latter part of December for an answer and you are who we have to ask.

Mr. GIBSON. Mr. Chairman, as I mentioned in response to an earlier question, the safety of staff, patients and veterans that we care for is of paramount importance to the Department.

Also, as I mentioned, I am unfamiliar with the specifics surrounding this particular item. Any response is going to be nothing more than speculation on my part. I would like to have the opportunity to respond back to you.

The CHAIRMAN. If I was the deputy secretary, I certainly would expect that somebody's probably watching this testimony now, either on television or webcast, that they would probably have an answer for you when you got back to the central office. So I would hope that we could very quickly have an opportunity to discuss what is going on.

Because the facts, as they have been presented in the press, are more than egregious, and I think not only do the taxpayers, are they owed an explanation, but certainly the members of this committee are. And I will take you at your word that you will respond as quickly as possible once you get briefed up. It is a pretty bad incident, a pretty bad incident.

Next—would be Mr. Walz

Well, Mr. Walz, first of all, how did you get up there? You were down here.

Mr. WALZ. I know. They had me walk down there first and then I came back up as a little shaming or something. I'm not sure what is going on.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Walz, you are recognized.

Mr. WALZ. Thank you, Chairman.

And Deputy Secretary, thank you. In listening to this, I am very appreciative. I am appreciative of listening to all of the meetings you had with members. I know it is a challenging job, but as a graduate of West Point, an Airborne Ranger, and son of a B-17 tail gunner, and grandson of a soldier who fought at the Marne, your family is used to tough things, and so I appreciate your candidness on this. I think you hear the frustration, maybe on both sides of the aisle a little bit, and I understand and we will look at this: You are clearly speaking the language of everybody in this committee, that we are a team together, but we need to work as a team to make that happen.

My suggestion, if it would be—and it is not necessarily a question—is a lot of these things can be started on the front end. One of the things we do is we never introduce legislation or try and do changes or anything like that unless we built the coalition of the VSOs, our constituents across the board.

But I have to tell you, though, the one piece that is kind of missing—and I don't know if it is the nature of the legislative versus the administrative/executive side of things—we always feel like there is a bit of resistance, and why I say that is if we send a suggestion over for a bill, we want candid input. And what we end up getting—and members would know this, too, sometimes you have a standard form letter, but we joke in our office, if I sent a bill over recognizing today was Thursday, there would be lots of red flags coming up from VA of why that is not a thing that we can be with.

And it is that type of thing that I think, then, is corrosive and leads to this long, drawn-out process where—and I don't—certainly,

I think the point was made we don't want to put you in a tough position, have you testifying under oath on things where that is. But it is the partnership in this of working from the beginning of an issue collaboratively together.

And you mentioned yesterday, which I was very appreciative of, Deputy Secretary, was this issue of creating some more informal means of talking and collaborating. That there is trust among folks who are entrusted with our Nation's veterans. Maybe elaborate a little bit of ways that we can do that, because I understand there are rules, there are regulations, there are open meetings, there are all those things, but sometimes all we are looking for is some informal feedback—Do you think this is a good idea or what does this actually mean? And what members hear is I will wait six months to get a canned answer that I knew I was already going to get.

So it is the content of the answer, not just the time that matters, too.

Mr. GIBSON. Right. Congressman, you are hitting the nail on the head right here in terms of the kinds of collaborative relationship that best serves veterans. I think those kinds of informal contact—in any relationship, the ability to have regular, candid communication is one of the vital ways that you feed a relationship and that a relationship grows. I think that it's an opportunity for VA and this committee, and I will look forward to pursuing those kinds of opportunities, personally, and to making staff alike.

Mr. WALZ. Well, I think it builds trust is that, you know, we are not calling over to trap somebody into saying something, just running something by them: What do you think about this bill on speeding the backlog, do you really think it would help? And if we could get a candid, trusted response back, that impacts how we go about it or what we can get done, that would be incredibly helpful to me.

And I think it would reduce your workload on this, and I would argue it would build stronger relationships and better legislation.

Mr. GIBSON. It is about finding ways to move together.

Mr. WALZ. And, again, I would be remiss if I wouldn't, as the co-chair with Chairman Miller of the—co-chair of the USO Caucus to thank you for your dedication when you were over at USO. It was bittersweet—I am glad you came over here—but I did not want to see you leave over there, because that is an important organization that you made even better, so thank you.

And I yield back.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you, Congressman.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. [Presiding] Thank you, sir.

Mr. Huelskamp, you are recognized for five minutes.

Mr. HUELSKAMP. Thank you, Mr. Vice Chairman.

I appreciate the opportunity to ask a few questions, and I think my colleague from New Jersey used the word that is most critical here and that is "accountability." And I have a few questions here and I would like to see if we can address those.

Deputy Secretary, there have been reported 19 preventable deaths nationwide, including six at the Columbia, South Carolina Center; three at the Augusta Medical Center due to delays in VA care. As I understand it, VA has refused to reveal the locations of the other ten deceased veterans, where they were seeking care.

Can you tell us specific locations today for the other ten deceased veterans, where they were seeking care?

Mr. GIBSON. Congressman, any time an adverse event occurs, anywhere in VA and veterans are harmed, that is a very serious matter to us. There are extensive processes that we go through in VHA to investigate and to document and understand the circumstances surrounding those adverse events and to ensure that they don't occur elsewhere in the organization subsequently.

I do not have particulars as it relates to those specific events. I would be glad to arrange for a member of the staff to brief your staff or to come by and brief you as well, sir.

Mr. HUELSKAMP. Will you commit, though, to providing the information by the close of business day for the committee?

Mr. GIBSON. Sir, what I want to do is provide you the information that we can provide when we can provide it, and so I am not familiar with the workings on the homework that is being done on that particular issue.

Mr. HUELSKAMP. We have ten deceased veterans and the VA has refused to reveal those locations. I think our veterans deserve to know where there was a delay in care that led to the death of a veteran. And as I understand it, the VA has refused to release those locations.

So I will ask you by the end of the day, we will make another request: Will you please provide that to the committee, and I would appreciate that.

The second issue deals with, again, on-going issue with Pittsburgh and Legionnaires' disease. We had a hearing on that, as I understand that, three days after the VA's Inspector General reported the mismanagement of the VA Pittsburgh Center's response to the disease outbreak, the director at that center received a \$63,000 bonus.

VA officials that repeatedly said that his bonus was under review, and then they allowed the gentleman to retire. Did anyone actually review the bonus? What is the status review, and when will it be completed? And I presume you don't know anything about this situation either, but I would appreciate a response to the committee on that particular issue, this on-going bonus issue.

And I would also like to know how many members of the Senior Executive Service in the past year received a bonus from the VA.

And the last one, two issues that are related to—specifically to responses. March of 2013 last year, my office received official confirmation from the VA that an outbased—outpatient clinic in Liberal, Kansas would receive a physician.

Last week I had an individual from that town was in my office and notified us that never did happen, and so 13 months later, after we were told it was happening, we were told by a constituent that it did, indeed, never did happen.

I am just curious how the VA can give some information that turned out to be inaccurate, and wouldn't you expect a notification back to our office that said, Congressman, that didn't happen, there is still a vacancy and you still have three years without a physician in Liberal, Kansas.

Can you describe what should be the proper response and whether you would be informing me in the future when you don't follow through on a request that was promised.

Mr. GIBSON. Congressman, I would say that in any kind of dialogue or conversation around an issue like that, when we have communicated information to a member and that information proves to be incorrect or the circumstances change, then we owe a follow-up conversation and communication to the member. That is part of building the kind of trusted relationship that needs to exist between the members of this committee and the Department.

Mr. HUELSKAMP. And I appreciate that, and that did not happen. Again, a Kansan has to catch us and say, the VA didn't tell you, but we are still waiting on a physician in Liberal, Kansas.

Further on—it is just outside of my district—there is a Topeka VA Center and still trying to understand why the emergency room was closed at this center, the VA, and I received no notification. Again, I heard about it at a town hall from a constituent. And it is hard to build trust when good information might be communicated, but these difficult situations and failures, the delays in care and refusal to answer questions makes it very difficult to visit with my constituents and honestly tell them that we are getting the full story from the VA.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you.

Ms. Titus, you are recognized for five minutes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Gibson, nice to see you.

Mr. GIBSON. Good to see you, ma'am.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you for taking time to join us this morning. I also want to thank you for your previous service at the USO and for working with me to get the facility at McCarran in Las Vegas. Every time I fly home, which is about every weekend, I am glad to see that USO is there.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you, ma'am.

Ms. TITUS. Absolutely. And as you outlined in your testimony, I know that the VA receives an enormous amount of correspondence and requests. You may be one of the most micromanaged agencies in the Executive Department because we all have concerns and we all have constituents—

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, you do.

Ms. TITUS.—who are veterans.

And I appreciate the offer that you have made to us in meetings and here today to work together better to provide accountability, to provide more information. Because this committee could be your biggest cheerleader if we have that information, but we need to know what is working well and what is not working so we can try to help you fix that. Just a couple of points of things that I have been concerned about and I think that you are aware of them, but I would just put them on the record again and hope to get more information down the road. One is the new veterans hospital in Las Vegas. It is a big, beautiful facility. We are very proud of it. Like any new facility, it is had growing pangs, but I am concerned that some of the things that are happening there like with the emergency room aren't taking into account some of veterans' input,

some of the doctors' input. I hope that we can kind of be notified about changes and work together to make that transition better.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. TITUS. I also want to ask you—again, I have done this before to the VA about the interim disability ratings. I have a bill that is pay-as-you-rate, so veterans can get some of their compensation as different parts of their cases are assessed.

The VA can already do that, but they are not doing it. Only about eight percent of the cases have been allowed to have that interim payment, but I haven't gotten a good answer of why that is the case or why that is a problem and how we can work better on that.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. TITUS. That has passed the House, and so we will see where it is going in the Senate. But if I know what your concerns are on how you can make it happen without the legislation, let me know.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. TITUS. And finally, I have been very concerned and very vocal about the performance of the Reno regional office. It has one of the worst records, one of the longest backlogs, some of the troubled personnel. I have talked about this many times.

They brokered half of their cases, so they brought down their backlog, but it is by sending half of their cases to other places. And we hear from the VSOs and from individual veterans that they can't now track it, that there is a lack of communication on these brokered cases. So if there is some way that we can look at a communication plan that includes all the stakeholders, I think there will be a lot more confidence in the fact that their cases are being sent somewhere else, and those that are left at the regional office are going to be addressed in a way that is appropriate; it's not that you are just getting rid of cases, you are solving problem as well.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. TITUS. So those are areas that I am working on. I appreciate your input and your help on this, and I thank you for being here.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am. I understand.

Ms. TITUS. And I yield back.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Mr. Coffman, you are recognized for five minutes.

Mr. COFFMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Secretary Gibson for being here today.

I want to tell you that after hearing your testimony today, I can't tell you how disappointed I am. I think you are dedicated to not making a difference. Because for you to come before this committee and conflate the numbers that come—the correspondence that comes from all congressional offices about questions about individual VA cases that usually stem from the district level, without breaking out the numbers that come from this office that are based on our oversight responsibilities—I think is stunning, and I think that tells me is what we are going to get out of your leadership, or lack thereof, is just more of the same. More of the same, that you are dedicated to making sure that things don't change.

You ought to be outraged. You ought to be outraged at the length of time it takes for VA to respond to the members of this committee on their oversight role.

Look, we had a hearing on February 13th of last year and I asked Dr. Petzel who was testifying before this committee on mental health issues that he had mentioned a survey that was completed four weeks prior to his testimony, about—it was VA providers—what VA providers are saying about the work being done related to mental health care, and I asked for that and he said he would have it to me, close of business that day.

I have not received it yet, and that is typical. That is not unusual. That is typical. And for you to come before this committee and say, everything's really fine, I am just going to make it a little bit better. Really? Just a little bit better? I mean come on. I just can't tell you how disappointed I am.

And I just think that maybe that is how you see your job description, keeping information away from this committee, not giving us information, not transparency on behalf of the veterans that have served this country on behalf at the taxpayers who foot the bill.

I yield back.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. Ms. Negrete McLeod, you are recognized for five minutes.

Ms. NEGRETTE-MCLEOD. Thank you. I have no questions; however, I would like to say—I would like to thank the Department for handling quite a few things on my behalf.

And just recently I called, last week during our week that we were home, I had a veteran that had come in who had felt that there was not attention given to the PTSD arena and he had some problems and I called when I came back last week. And they quickly responded to him. They called him and wanted to know if they could help him in any way and try to get an appointment quicker than he was having one over in Loma Linda, and so I just wanted to thank you for coming, and testifying before us.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you, ma'am. Thank you for the feedback.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Dr. Wenstrup, you are recognized for five minutes.

Mr. WENSTRUP. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Gibson, I want to say thank you for your service to our country, and I am hopeful with you being here. I have worked with you on USO events in Cincinnati and have been nothing but impressed with the work that you have done there and we have had some pretty successful events and it has been a pleasure to work with you there.

Obviously, we all have concerns and we all know that there are problems within the VA and in the communication with us a lot of times. And I have come to find in the years that I have been here that sometimes people in the VA don't know what they don't know; for example, on the healthcare side, we had a committee of doctors here and I asked the doctors if any of them had ever been in the private sector in managing hospital systems and they haven't. So they have been in a system—they have been in academia, you know, where they are salaried. They don't have to make ends meet necessarily; that is not an issue.

And as a doctor in the army, I served in DoD facilities where I know the inefficiencies there—not that the care is bad—but the fact that I can only see 15 patients in a DoD facility, wherein in

my private practice, I would see 45 to 50 in the same amount of time.

These are the types of things that the people that are running, they don't know that. They have never been that, and for the last year I have offered to go into the hospitals, into the clinics, into the ORs, and talk about what could be done to improve things.

And when we had a hearing recently, I asked can you tell me, for example, patients in an eight-hour day in the clinic, an orthopaedic surgeon sees?

And they said, We have no idea.

And so then what are you measuring—and this was the doctor trying to evaluate the efficiencies—I said what are you measuring?

We are making some headway on that. We are going to get some time, and hopefully we can make a difference here. I mean, I am here and I want to be part of the solutions, not just complain.

But at the same time we had a breakfast five weeks ago and I hand-delivered a letter to General Shinseki asking about the prescription drug monitoring program that we have one in Ohio where we share information amongst the medical professionals, amongst doctors to know who is getting what narcotics and where so that we are not over prescribing or that we tend to try to help somewhere—someone, rather than continue to prescribe unnecessarily. The VA is able to get that information from the private sector in Ohio, but the private sector can't get it from the VA. And I asked why are we still behind on that, and I have received nothing back, and I hand-delivered that.

At the same time, you know, I asked Dr. Petzel one time and he said, Well, it is an IT problem.

Well, why is it an IT problem?

Because the funding has been there. So our doctors in Ohio cannot get that information.

So here is the situation: Now, five weeks you were at that breakfast and I want to know why; I haven't been heard from, I haven't heard anything.

Mr. GIBSON. Congressman, first of all, thank you for the willingness to engage positively, particularly in light of your background, and experience and your professional training and credentials; it is a valuable resource to the VA and I am grateful that you would be willing to do that.

We owe you an answer and I will see that we get you a status update promptly.

Mr. WENSTRUP. I appreciate that, but that is the type of thing that everyone is talking about, and I know that you haven't been on the job very long——

Mr. GIBSON. That's right.

Mr. WENSTRUP [continuing]. And I recognize that it is a mountain to climb, and, again, knowing you personally, I think that you are the man that can get that job done, but you have a lot on your hands and I will pin some high hopes on you.

Mr. GIBSON. Thank you, sir.

Mr. WENSTRUP. Thank you.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you very much.

Any further questions?

All right. I——

Ms. BROWN. I have one.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. You have a question?

Ms. BROWN. Yes, I do.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Okay. You are recognized.

Ms. BROWN. Thank you again for coming.

But my question pertains to a couple of the members have said that they wanted something by the end of the day, and both of their issues sound like they are legal issues. How do you all handle a situation like that if the case is in court or under legal review? What kind of response could you give?

Mr. GIBSON. Well, I think the response, ma'am, will have to be shaped by the advice of counsel.

Ms. BROWN. Yes.

Mr. GIBSON. Whether there is outstanding litigation or whether there are privacy issues associated, either with patient matters or with employee matters, and so the response has to be shaped by that input, but we still owe a response.

Ms. BROWN. I agree, you owe a response, but the response may not be the in-depth detail as to what the person is asking, because basically, if you give it to us, we will read it in the press and if it is a legal situation, then, you know, we are not under oath.

Mr. GIBSON. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. BROWN. Uh-huh.

Mr. GIBSON. You are exactly right, but we owe you a response.

Ms. BROWN. Yes.

Mr. GIBSON. That is part of building the kind of collaborative relationship that we want to have. That is how we wind up working together to find ways to move forward. That is not just going back and forth; that is not constructive.

Ms. BROWN. I agree.

And relationships are two ways and it is not just what we want; it is how we treat you, how we respond to you. It is a partnership. It is a marriage. It is what we are doing together for the veterans.

And with that, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you very much.

And I'd like to recognize now, the ranking member for whatever he would like, questions, statement, whatever.

Make some comments, please. You are recognized, sir.

Mr. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, I ask that Ms. Kirkpatrick's statement be included in the record. She had to leave earlier.

The CHAIRMAN. So moved.

Mr. MICHAUD. Thank you.

Mr. MICHAUD. And once again, I want to thank you very much, Mr. Gibson. I am impressed by your testimony. I know that you have been at the Department for a short time, but also knowing your previous history with USOs that you are a good fit for the Department.

And open collaboration, communication, and honesty is extremely important for this committee, for us to do our job because I do know that even though some members haven't brought up some of the issues, that my staff get a lot of requests from members of this committee saying, Well, why haven't we heard from OCLA yet? They come to us to complain about it.

And so I think that the more we can have that open communication, the better off that we all will be, and some of the frustrations that you saw this morning from some members on both sides of the aisle, I think will help lower that frustration if we have that open, you know, line of communications.

In a way, we can speed up the process, and one way that I thought of, that I mentioned in my opening statement was the subject-matter experts. I think that is one of the ways to speed up the process, but still, we have a ways to go in that area.

But I looking forward to working with you, and once, again, thank you for your service, and thanks for being here today. Appreciate it.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Thank you. Thank you very much.

And, sir, again, I know you have only been on the job for six weeks. I appreciate your service to our country and what you have done for the USO and your service here.

But I will tell you we are very, very serious about this. We have got to see some improvement. You know, the members are frustrated and rightly so. Just like—I agree with the ranking member. We have got to get some answers quickly, and again, the lack of communication is extremely frustrating. If you don't have the answer or if you can't give the answer for legal reasons, get back to us. Let us know. We have to know that you are working on it.

So, again, we have got to be able to do our jobs, and when we don't get these responses in a timely manner, it is very difficult to—it inhibits our ability to communicate to our constituents.

So, please, I implore you to make some improvements. You know, there is no excuse. There is no excuse. You have the staffing, 30 percent increase since 2009, so let's get the job done. And I appreciate you being here today, and thank you for your testimony.

Mr. GIBSON. Mr. Chairman, message received, and I look forward to being with you on the 12th of April down in Tampa to cut the ribbon.

Mr. BILIRAKIS. Excellent. Thank you.

Thanks so such.

If there are no further questions for Secretary Gibson, I asked unanimous consent that all members have five legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material into the hearing record.

Thank you, the hearing—with no exceptions the hearing—no objections, the hearing now stands adjourned.

Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

[Whereupon, at 1:35 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JEFF MILLER, CHAIRMAN

Good morning and the hearing will come to order. As the title of today's hearing suggests, to conduct our constitutional oversight duties, VA needs to respond in a timely manner to our requests for information.

With us today is Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson. I would note that we again invited Assistant Secretary Mooney to testify since she is, by title, the assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs and as a presidential appointee, she agreed to testify before congress as part of her confirmation process.

For the second time, we are gathered to hear how we can improve a process that too often has resulted in frustration and delay. Let me start with a positive. Since our last hearing, VA has improved its submission of testimony on time. So that is certainly an area where progress has been made. Mr. Secretary, I would also like to recognize what I view as a positive tone in your written testimony about improving the timely response to Committee requests. You are totally correct in that the Veterans Affairs' Committees and VA have a common duty to ensure we meet the nation's commitment to its veterans.

Unfortunately, long-delayed responses for information, documents, or questions continue. As of Tuesday, the average days pending for all 96 requests was 143 with 66 pending over sixty days and 50 over one hundred days. In fact, we have 3 requests pending since 2012 and our oldest outstanding request is 666 days pending.

The last time we visited this subject with Assistant Secretary Mooney, she testified regarding the literally thousands of requests VA receives from Capitol Hill. I understand the reality, but I will continue the committee's active oversight of the department. As they should, Members of the House and Senate take great interest in VA and its programs because of its mission. That won't change on my watch.

I understand there are lots of moving parts involving responses to our requests, many of which are outside VA's control but in the end, it is VA's responsibility to provide congress with complete, accurate and timely answers. Regardless, perhaps moving the issue up the chain of command will help improve VA's performance in this area, so Secretary Gibson, I thank you for testifying today.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MICHAEL MICHAUD, RANKING MINORITY MEMBER

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

I share your view that this hearing is not just about accountability for individual Congressional requests, but also an opportunity to discuss what can be done to improve the relationship between VA and this Committee.

Mr. Gibson, congratulations on your recent appointment as Deputy Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. We appreciate you being here today. I am, along with the Chairman, a bit

disappointed that Assistant Secretary Mooney and Undersecretary for Health Petzel are not joining you at the witness table as they were invited.

I am, however, encouraged by the shift in tone conveyed by your participation and written testimony. For the first time, the Department has clearly, concisely, and publically indicated the status quo must change. Thank you for that open and honest acknowledgement.

Also, from your written testimony and our recent conversation, it appears you, as the Deputy Secretary and “Chief Operating Officer,” are taking on the challenge from a Department perspective. I think that will be a significant improvement, and I look forward to working with you in a collaborative and constructive manner.

As I have laid out in my discussions with the Secretary, I have three basic expectations of the VA around customer service.

- My first expectation is that VA is *responsive* to Congressional inquiries. While I recognize the founding fathers' construct of the separation of power, I also recognize their construct of checks and balances between these separate powers. Oversight is a fundamental power provided Congress, and a fundamental obligation. Getting information from the Department is crucial to Congress doing its job. This is not a theoretical civics discussion, but directly affects our ability, as a co-equal branch of government, to do our job. VA's responses to Congressional inquiries should be thoughtful, thorough and complete.

Since my recent conversation with Secretary Shinseki, a set of standard operating procedures addressing responsiveness between the Committee Democratic staff and VA's OCLA have been agreed to and put in place. These appear to be working well so far. I appreciate the VA OCLA team's willing to work out these SOPs, and adhere to them. I hold my staff accountable for adhering to our part of this agreement.

- My second expectation is that VA is *timely* in its response to Congressional inquiries. I recognize that thoughtful, thorough and complete responses take time. I also recognize that time moves at different paces in Congress and the VA. This is not a judgment statement—merely an acknowledgement that our work occurs at different speeds. Congress should not expect VA to operate at our extremely rapid pace. Nor should the VA expect Congress to operate at its slower pace. Reasonable accommodation is somewhere in-between. When a response is needed and what can be provided by that date, and when a final response will be forthcoming, should be a frequent, routine discussion between our staffs.

Since the last Transparency hearing held by this Committee in September 2013, we have seen an improvement in the timeliness of VA testimony submissions and responses to Congressional inquiries. However, we continue to see substantial delays, from one to three months, on a few individual Member inquiries tracked by the Committee staff. I will defer to these Members to discuss the specifics with you directly.

It is often difficult to get a straight answer on the reason for a delay in responding. It appears the lack of timeliness in VA responses to Congressional inquiries may, in part, be the cumbersome review process that responses are required to go through—both internal and external to the organization preparing the response. This, Mr. Gibson, is likely the toughest part of your challenge to improve the process. However, it behooves everyone involved in the review and approval process to work collaboratively to change and improve the process. No one benefits from frus-

trated, dysfunctional relationships between an Administration, Agency and Congress—least of all America's veterans.

- My final expectation is that VA allows Congressional Members and staff *direct access to subject matter experts* within the Department. This means that the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs facilitate, not control, the interactions between VA executives and The Hill. For the most part, in these interactions, in my opinion, OCLA's role should be transparent to us.

Last year, it took me—the Ranking Member of this Committee—three days to get the phone number for the Undersecretary for Health. I wanted to thank him for the great care one of my staff received at the VA Medical Center here in Washington, DC. That is simply unacceptable.

Our staffs hear informally that VA's subject matter experts want to talk with us—they want to share the good news and progress they are making; they believe getting ahead of bad news is important; they understand that the trust you mention in your written testimony begins with open, honest communication. We in Congress understand the need and value of a synchronized message. The way to accomplish that is through internal Department coordination, not a single filter. Politicians know that during a campaign you try to control the message, but during the governing process that comes after the election, you need to collaborate around the message. Failing to do this typically means failure in the next campaign.

Just recently, one of my staff members met a young soldier at a professional reception. He was there representing a new Army program to help soldiers transition from active duty. Unable to have a robust discussion about the program at the reception, the soldier agreed to follow-up with my staff. Within the week, that soldier and my staff exchanged several emails, met once and set up follow-on meetings for other staff and Members. There was no red-tape, no DoD or Army legislative affairs intervention, no delays, no complications. *That*, is what I expect from VA—just swift, simple, direct business.

Mr. Gibson, I look forward to your testimony today. I look forward to hearing in more detail how you plan to change the process internal to VA. And, I look forward to hearing what you need from us in Congress to rebuild the trust and improve our working relationship.

I yield back.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SLOAN D. GIBSON

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs: I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) work to provide Congress with needed information.

VA and Congress share the same goal: to do everything we can to improve the healthcare, benefits and other services delivered to our Nation's Veterans, their families, and Survivors earned through service. That is what guides our work at VA throughout the country.

I want to acknowledge the dedicated professionals that work at VA. While more work remains, remarkable progress has been made in implementing Secretary Shinseki's top priorities: improving Veteran access to VA benefits and services, eliminating the claims backlog in 2015, and ending Veteran homelessness in 2015. As a Veteran who cares deeply about the welfare of Veterans and their families, I also want to express my gratitude for the passion, commitment and sustained support Congress continues to provide, both in resources and legislative authorities, for these critical initiatives.

Everything we do at VA is built on a foundation of trust. We earn the trust of Veterans as we deliver, each day, on our promise to care for those "who shall have borne the battle." We also have to earn the trust of the American people and their elected representatives. They provide the resources that allow us to serve Veterans, and they must have confidence that VA is a good steward of those resources. Anything that erodes this trust does tangible harm to Veterans.

For the benefit of our Veterans, the status quo in our working relationship must change. The Committee is not receiving all the information it needs in a timely manner. From my perspective, this is not a VA Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs (OCLA) issue. It is not a Veterans Health Administration or a Veterans Benefits Administration issue. It is a Department issue. That is why I am here. I am committed to working with the Committee in a collaborative and constructive manner to best serve our Veterans.

We will do better. In fact, the data show that since the last hearing on this subject, in September 2013, our on-time performance for delivering testimony and Questions for the Record has improved dramatically. In that time period, 100 percent of QFRs and 95 percent of written testimony were submitted on-time. Additionally, during the same time period, the Department has responded to over 1,000 requests for information from Congress. We can do more to improve the on-time delivery of congressionally mandated reports and correspondence, and we are working aggressively in those areas. VA is committed to working with Congress to deliver needed information in a timely and accurate manner.

It is important to note that VA is already providing vast amounts of information. In the first five months of this Fiscal Year VA has testified at 24 hearings, delivered 178 briefings, responded to 1,063 Requests for Information, responded to 187 pieces of executive correspondence, completed 130 requests for Technical Assistance on legislation, and answered 653 Questions for the Record. By any standard, this is a remarkable volume of information.

The level of care and services VA provides to Veterans every day has an impact on every Member of Congress because every Member represents Veterans in their district. Most Members of Congress also represent districts that have VA facilities that provide and maintain healthcare, benefits, and cemeteries. For that reason, VA receives a large number of requests from Congress. In FY 2013 and the first five months of FY 2014, VA Central Office responded to tens of thousands of Congressional requests for information.

Moving forward, I want to ensure that VA and this committee are working together in a positive, constructive, and collaborative manner. Our Veterans expect that we expend our time and energy moving forward. That will require regular and open two way communication to insure that we are putting our resources toward those efforts that best support appropriate congressional oversight and lead to improved care and services for our Veterans.

To reiterate, VA and Congress share the same goal: to do everything we can to improve the healthcare, benefits and other services delivered to our Nation's Veterans, their families, and Survivors. We respect Congress' important oversight role and look forward to working collaboratively and cooperatively together.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify and am prepared to answer any questions you may have.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES FOR THE RECORD

QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD

Representative Kirkpatrick

1. Unlike most federal agencies, the Department of Veterans Affairs touches each congressional district in a unique way—we all represent veteran communities. This means that VA garners a lot of attention from not only this committee, but the entire Congress. Outside of the requests for information from this committee, how many other requests does VA receive and respond to from the entire Congress?

2. How does VA prioritize requests for information from Congress? Does the committee need to do a better job of prioritizing our requests?

3. Mr. Gibson, as a new addition to VA, what are your first impressions of the department? What do you think VA does well and where do you believe there is room for improvement?

Congressman G. K. Butterfield

1. When the Department of Veterans Affairs is hosting an event in a state and participation from Members of Congress is desired, what procedures do VA regional personnel take to invite the proper elected officials to events?

2. Who ultimately has oversight of VA's regional personnel in their dealings with Members of Congress? Is the VA Office of Legislative Affairs the best office within the Department to have ultimate oversight over VA's regional offices in their interactions with Members of Congress?

3. How are invitations disseminated to Members of Congress and their offices? What are the procedures for following-up on these invitations?

4. After the initial invite, how do VA regional office personnel communicate with Members of Congress and their staff?

5. In dealing with Members of Congress, how do the regional VA offices communicate with your office in Washington, D.C. to update you on their interactions with Members and their staff? Who reports to whom and who is ultimately responsible for proper communication with Members and their offices?

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES FOR THE RECORD

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The level of care and services VA provides to Veterans every day has an impact on every Member of Congress because every Member represents Veterans in their district. Most Members of Congress

also represent districts that have VA facilities that provide and maintain health care, benefits, and cemeteries. For that reason, VA receives a large number of requests from Congress.

In the first six months of this fiscal year (FY) 2014, VA has testified at 32 hearings, delivered 213 briefings, responded to 1,346 requests for information, responded to 213 pieces of executive correspondence, completed 143 requests for technical assistance on legislation, answered 723 questions for the record and responded to 9,748 constituent casework inquiries from the Central office level, additional primary POC on casework and notification at local VA offices.

2. How does VA prioritize requests for information from Congress? Does the committee need to do a better job of prioritizing our request?

We take all requests from Congress seriously and try to follow-up with answers in a timely and expeditious manner. We prioritize requests from Chairmen and Ranking Members of committees of jurisdiction, Congressional leadership, followed by any other request in the order that they are received. VA endeavors to work with the committee in a positive and constructive manner, and we would welcome any additional guidance the Committee may have on how we can best prioritize the requests.

3. Mr. Gibson, as a new addition to VA, what are your impressions of the department? What do you think VA does well and here do you believe there is room for improvement?

My most prominent and important first impression is of the people who work at VA. I see men and women, many Veterans themselves, that care deeply about VA's mission, that want to do the right thing, and work incredibly hard to get it done. I believe this is the motivating force that drives the people I have met at the VA.

I believe the single most important opportunity for improvement is the need to do a better job conveying to Veterans, to the American people, and to their elected representatives the vast body of great work that is done for Veterans day in and day out. While there are opportunities for us to improve—as there always are in any large organization—the fact is that VA delivers on its promise to hundreds of thousands of Veterans every single day. This simple fact must be the foundation of the trust vital to our relationship with those we serve and those who provide the resources essential to our mission.

Representative G.K. Butterfield

1. When Department of Veterans Affairs is hosting an event in a state and participation from Members of Congress is desired, what procedures do VA regional personnel take to invite the proper elected officials to events?

The Department's protocol suggests inviting both U.S. Senators and the U.S. Representative of the facility's congressional district to speak, while inviting other Members of Congress and state officials to attend.

2. Who ultimately has oversight of VA's regional personnel in their dealing with Members of Congress? Is the VA Office of Legislative Affairs the best office within the Department to have ultimate oversight over VA's regional offices in their interactions with Members of Congress?

The local VA staffs are responsible to their individual offices in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) or National Cemetery Administration (NCA). Given the volume and complexity involved in the management of the day-to-day local VA/congressional interactions, it is beneficial to utilize all available resources to include regional and local VA staff. The Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs (OCLA) serves as the Department's primary point of contact for Members of Congress and their staffs on matters regarding policy, oversight, and Members' requests. The office maintains relationships and encourages the flow of information between VA and Members of Congress and congressional staff. OCLA should be the focal point for Department management and coordination of all matters involving Congress.

3. How are invitations disseminated to Members of Congress and their offices? What are the procedures for following-up on these invitations?

The Department's protocol includes recommendations on the development and distribution of invitations for special events. Local facilities are responsible for ensuring this guidance is incorporated into their local standard operating procedures.

The Department's protocol includes recommendations on the development and distribution of invitations for special events, including following-up on invitations. Local facilities are responsible for ensuring this guidance is incorporated into their local standard operating procedures.

4. After initial invite, how do VA regional office personnel communicate with Members of Congress and their staff?

The Department's protocol includes recommendations for following-up on invitations, including requesting RSVPs. Local facilities are responsible for ensuring this guidance is incorporated into their local standard operating procedures.

5. In dealing with Members of Congress, how do the regional VA offices communicate with your office in Washington, D.C. to update you on their interactions with Members and their staff? Who reports to whom and who is ultimately responsible for proper communication with Members and their offices?

Regional and local offices communicate with VA central office through their respective chains of command in each administration and program office. Constituent issues are generally handled at the local level and national policy issues are handled by OCLA. OCLA works with the administrations and staff offices to advance responsive and effective congressional communications.

OCLA is the focal point for Department management and coordination of all matters involving the Congress. OCLA serves as the Department's primary point of contact for Members of Congress

and their staffs on matters regarding policy, oversight, and Members' requests. The office maintains relationships and encourages the flow of information between VA and Members of Congress and congressional staff.

